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ABSTRACT

This speech, presented before the Board of Trustees of Cornell University on January 22, 1971 concerns the future of private higher education. The author is pessimistic about the future of private higher education in New York as it now stands. First, colleges under religious auspices, particularly those under Catholic sponsorship, are moving toward more secular norms. Second, there are several colleges that are too small in size to be efficient and lack the diversity of other institutions, public and private. Third, some institutions in the urban areas are finding it hard to relate to the social issues and problems which surround them. Fourth, inflation and the costs of instruction have led to a cost-price squeeze for the private institutions. Fifth, some private institutions are mismanaged or are the victims of visionary planning. Sixth, the position of the administration in Washington toward financing higher education is less than adequate. Seventh, community colleges and other types of postsecondary institutions are creating more diversified educational programs that attract more students than the traditional programs. (Author/PG)

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THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE OF PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION

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THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE OF PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:

You should know that I regard Dale Corson as the outstanding university president in the nation -- in his age group -- whatever age group that is.

And, I'd like, too, to pay glowing tribute to a coworker in the Albany vineyards, Martin Catherwood, whom you have honored today by designating him, "Trustee Emeritus,"

The Classics Department at Cornell advises me that the word "emeritus" is derived from two other Latin roots, "e", meaning you're out, and "meritus" meaning you deserved it.

It has been just a little over a year since I accepted the Commissionership -- with exuberant humility. A year or so ago, I was asked what it was like to be a new Commissioner, following 12 years as Executive Deputy Commissioner and six months as Acting Commissioner. My reply then took the form of a story once related by Father Hesburgh, President of Notre Dame University. He told of the university president who died and unfortunately went to hell. I guess he was unskilled in unstructured confrontation management. Anyway, it took him four days before he discovered any difference.

After one year plus in office, I have some other stories to relate the pains and the pleasures of serving as Commissioner of Education.

Every time I develop some pride in what we are doing and believing that the State Education Department is making a difference, or has succeeded in at least raising the quality of discontent, there is always some citizen, a board member, a college president, or even an occasional legislator who can put a sobering perspective on the matter in hand, not infrequently with the use of liberated rhetoric. And so I am reminded of the man and his wife who went to church one day to pray. Out loud, the man prayed, "Oh, Lord, make me successful, and please keep me humble." His wife, kneeling beside him, chimed in with a somewhat corrective plea: "Oh, Lord, you make him successful, I'll keep him humble."

And reflecting once in a while about the crises of confidence in our schools and colleges and feeling the chill of an occasional public breeze that blows in our faces and the cold shadow that sometimes falls across the educational community, I take comfort in Brendan Behan, who was once asked why the world did not like the Irish as well as the English, the French and the Germans. His reply is memorable: "We are very popular amongst ourselves."

And then at the worst moments I think of the wildcat who, in the midst of making love to a skunk, exclaimed: "I've enjoyed as much of this as I can stand."

This is all by way of saying that I like the job, there are many clear days on which you can see forever, there are no surprises, that the important thing is to know how to laugh and especially at ourselves, and that deep down and not so deep down, many people like yourselves, care about making the quality of education better and extending educational opportunity to as many as can benefit from it, many people who believe as I do, that education is the only instrument by which we can remove ignorance, that education is what makes progress possible, that the cost of education is far cheaper than the cost of ignorance. In America, we pay a high price for poverty, prejudice and injustice -- and at the root of these is ignorance.

Dale Corson called me some time back and tempted me with the prospect of speaking to you this evening. You know what temptation is: Temptation is something a woman runs away from, but which a man crawls away from, slowly, hoping it will overtake him.

Anyway, Dale said you would be interested in anything that exercised my own mind so long as I would be (a) brief, (b) entertaining, and (c) thought-provoking. These are the standard but rarely filled specifications for this kind of a talk. It would be an unusual but welcome experience to be invited once to give a talk that is (a) long-winded, (b) dull, and (c) depressing.

I thought I would spend a few minutes with you talking about the future of private higher education. Predicting is always a hazardous

business and frequently foolish, and perhaps I should heed the advice of a certain Episcopal bishop in Virginia who was asked by a parishioner whether a non-Episcopalian could enter the Kingdom of Heaven. "Frankly," he said, "the idea had never occurred to me; but if he is a gentleman, he will not make the attempt."

With respect to financial support: It is difficult to find any one of our social and political agencies which does not now give high public visibility to some form of financial distress. Public higher education in New York went through financially felicitous days in the decade of the sixties and received for the first time large dollops of money which allowed the State University to come into its own and the City University to expand its role, particularly at the graduate level. For many reasons, but especially the fiscal plight of the State which is the worst I've seen in 20 years, and the circular, counter-productive effects of campus unrest and the tendency toward social action by and politicization of,the colleges and universities, which alienate taxpayers and their legislative representatives, state support for public higher education may be cresting.

But as an editorial in the New York Times recently stated about both public and private higher education: A period of rigorous austerity seems inevitable for an academic establishment that has known only luxuriant growth for an entire generation.

I come now to the financing of private higher education and the future of so-called independent, private colleges and universities; I say "so-called" because there are very few, if any, private institutions which are not receiving State or Federal funds to some degree, often substantial. What this means eventually, I cannot forecast. Will they eventually become quasi-non-governmental?

New York has always been proud of the variety in its academic community. State government, as represented by the Regents and as they have been instructed by the Legislature, has always been legally obligated to preserve and strengthen this diversity.

I can assure you that the State and the Regents, through their executive arm, the State Education Department, are fully committed to private enterprise and initiatives in higher education, and their support in the past is a matter of record. It is public policy to support private higher education in a variety of ways.

No state has a greater commitment to private higher education. If one insists as I do that the responsibility for the support of higher education under private auspices must be distributive in nature rather than narrow, then, surely, in this regard at least, the circle of felicities of New York's private institutions is considerably more rounded than that of colleges and universities in other states.

What about the future of private higher education?

I am a trifle pessimistic about the future of private higher education as we now know it or have known it. Why? Several considerations come to mind, not all financial. (And I think you should know that I define a pessimist as simply a well-informed optimist.)

First, with regard to the institutions under religious auspices, and particularly those under Catholic sponsorship, of which we have many in this State, Pope John and Vatican II, with a slight but important assist from the cash benefits of the New York State Bundy program to aid non-sectarian institutions, have combined to move Catholic colleges at a rapid pace toward more secular norms. Sectarian ties are being eliminated or played down. I have recently declared Fordham University, Manhattanville College, and St. John Fisher College, and just last week, Mercy College, as eligible for general State aid from the Bundy program. I never dreamed that a Lutheran would one day come to declare a Jesuit institution as no longer Catholic. In my view, these institutions are now secular and no longer sectarian.

In some ways I regret this development because it means that our pluralism, which we have so long prized, is being shrunk by an increased homogenization of our higher institutions. Institutions are becoming more and more alike.

Secondly, we have several colleges that are too small in size to be efficient and sometimes they lack, too, the glamor, the diversity, and the higher competence of other institutions, both public and private.

Our heralded diversity is becoming a declining force, though, having said that, it is true that small colleges are different from big ones. I would speculate that in the future, unless some unique program or clientele is being served, only those private institutions will survive which are better in quality and more innovative than their public counterparts.

Thirdly, some institutions in the urban areas are not uniformly finding it easy to relate to the social issues and problems which surround them, and, in any case, existing as they do in the cities with their intense problems of blight and decay, congestion, poverty, racial tensions, crime, pollution, and housing, may become less attractive as centers of learning for students.

Fourthly, as we all know, inflation and the costs of instruction have led to a cost-price squeeze for the private institutions. As has been said recently, many such schools have been witnessing a widening gap between rapidly rising operating expenses on the one hand, and less rapidly rising income from tuition, endowments, and gifts on the other. Private colleges tend to cater to the relatively rich and make it increasingly difficult for the middle class and the poor to gain entry.

Fifthly, some private institutions, from my close observations, are mismanaged or are the victims of visionary planning or both. I have in mind, among other things, two recent cases of bankruptcy which at least have the virtue of serving as excellent examples of bad planning, administration and trusteeship. These institutions are valuable to the

State and society and will become more-or-less state-supported (or even operated). Greater efforts must be made to plan ahead and to allocate scarce resources wisely.

As of this moment, there are two other institutions in critical trouble with an early demise in prospect, and seven others in serious financial difficulties. And, of course, there are several institutions which are operating on a deficit basis -- they cannot do so for long. Not incidentally, I do not see how most private medical schools can stay private beyond this decade.

Sixthly, another reason I am pessimistic is the position of the present Administration in Washington toward financing higher education. Under President Nixon's maxi-policies he wears a mini-program. His rhetoric of concern for education is not matched by comparable action. As Tallulah Bankhead once said about Alexander Woollcott: There is less here than meets the eye.

Seventh, many students go on to four-year baccalaureate degrees simply because the college degree has become a status symbol, employment is predicated upon a degree, or because of the draft or parental expectations. There are, indeed, as Kingman Brewster has said, many involuntary students on our campuses. I expect the emphasis to shift; moreover, community colleges and other types of post-secondary institutions are creating more diversified educational programs in which students ought to enroll rather than in a

baccalaureate program.

Moreover, I expect alternative routes to degrees will be developed, not least among them being the expansion of the external degree idea which I announced in my inaugural address last September. That idea has generated intense excitement and support, and the Department, as well as other institutions, is going ahead with it. The external degree idea is simply a response to our highly credentialed society with its degree fixation that recognizes that today there are many ways to become educated without going to school and college in 12 to 16 consecutive uninterrupted years of prolonged adolescence. There are new learning forces abroad in the military, in business and industry, learning by way of correspondence, television, post-secondary trade and technical schools, libraries, museums, and so on. I believe in our credentialed society that we should give credit to people for what they know, no matter how they acquired it.

Recognizing all these things and believing deeply in the need to maintain diversity and a mixed economy in our higher educational system, we are doing several things:

Perhaps the biggest effort is the Bundy Program, as it has been known from the start. This has been in operation for one full year and is now in its second year. Under the Bundy provisions, just under 60 non-sectarian institutions receive approximately $26 million annually on the basis of $400 for each bachelor's and master's degree granted the prior year and $2400 for each doctoral degree granted. Not incidentally, the

determination of whether an institution is sectarian or not is not an easy or insensitive task.

One of our concerns in this program is the fact that the Blaine Amendment still rules in New York State. This means that roughly half of the institutions which might be eligible are not receiving aid because of Constitutional prohibitions against use of State funds to support church-related education. The Board of Regents and I have advocated for some years the elimination of this constitutional restraint. We hope that day will come. There are, too, pending cases in the Supreme Court, decisions on which should help to define the limits of our ignorance. It is noteworthy, however, that 85 percent of the students enrolled in private higher education in this State are in Bundy institutions.

These days, as inflation ravages all of our societal structures, I know full well that a stipulated amount per degree becomes less important as a percentage of operating budget each year unless the amount is altered. Thus, the Department has been working with representatives from the private institutions on a proposal for 1971-72 which would call for some alterations in amount of Bundy aid to reflect the increasing financial plight of the institutions, induced by many factors, including not only inflation, but rising fire insurance costs, decline of foundation giving, the advent of unemployment compensation insurance, the extra expenses of admitting unconventional students now that the conscience of higher education has been pricked; changes in tax exemption

and the conscientious response of some institutions to community financing; the difficulties of capital fund-raising, the stock market situation which affects investment portfolios and contributions from donors; the new experience with that contact sport, collective negotiations, unionization of faculties, and increased militancy from both academic and non-academic sectors; the reduction of Federal support -- all of these and others constitute an eroding confluence of financial forces.

I have recommended to the Regents and the Regents have adopted the proposal to increase the general State aid to private non-sectarian institutions by placing payments at $300 for each associate degree (a new recommendation for next year); $800 for each bachelor's degree, up from $400 in the past year; $600 for a master's degree, up from $400; and $3000 for each doctorate, up from $2400.

Over-all cost of the program for the next fiscal year would be $43 million plus, up from the $26 million cost this year.

Cornell will receive this year, I believe, about $1,800,000 under the present formula and under the new one, well over $2 and a half million.

I do raise one question: Since the Bundy formula is based on productivity, i.e., degrees awarded, what does this suggest for improved guidance and counseling and critical reforms of several kinds which will reduce the average high attrition rate in higher education.

We have recommended to the Governor that our Higher Education Opportunity Program to expand opportunities for higher education for the economically and educationally disadvantaged, and to help private institutions to engage in open admissions, be increased from $4 million to $6.5 million for private institutions. Cornell shares in this program.

We have also proposed changes in our scholar incentive program, raising the maximum award from $600 to $800 for undergraduates and lifting the minimum income level for the highest award from $2000 to $3000, and raising the number of Regents Scholarships from 18,000 to approximately 24,000 in order to achieve the 10 percent goal of graduating high school seniors. Finally, there is pending a proposed program of financial aid for institutions having engineering programs. Nothing has been settled yet, and I am not able to give you the final recommendations here.

We shall probably not get legislative adoption of all these programs. This is a bleak year, indeed. What it means is that presidents and trustees must work harder to elicit popular support from the public and political responsiveness from our Legislators and the Governor. The higher education community is the least sophisticated constituency I know in its instincts for relating to the political process.

There are important public policy questions to answer concerning private higher education. For instance:

1. Are all private institutions essential to the State or worth saving? Should the State be committed to saving all private institutions simply because they are private institutions? Some are marginal.

2. Should the State be committed to preserving private higher education without raising questions of needed reform, of subsidizing only programs satisfying State manpower requirements or public needs, of providing greater accountability, of ensuring increased efficiency or quality? Should institutional need be a consideration?

A great deal needs to be done to reform higher education in constructive ways, to interpret to the public what higher education represents, what its mission is, what its relationship to society is, and where it is trying to go in this decade.

3. The State can't do it all -- what is the Federal Government's share? And to what extent are institutions and organizations as actively engaged in pressing for Federal assistance as they are in soliciting more State aid? Much needs to be done in influencing our Congressional delegation about the need for Federal support.

Whatever the answers, I, too, believe our problems are soluble, and, in any case, I am fully confident that by 1980 private higher education will be alive and well and living in Ithaca.

We have much to be thankful for in this State and especially in education, and its trustees and presidents, and in our political leaders. I take the view that, while things are not as good as they could be, they are better than they were. There is an old American paradox that if we had not already done so much, we would not still have so much to do. It is just that so many expectations

have been raised about what could be and which cannot be fulfilled fast enough, and because knowledge about things advances faster than knowledge about people, that we have a society with its discontent and disquiet and the frequent rejection of knowledge and the institutions that generate it.

I am reminded of the chairman of a board of trustees who was once asked what had become of his last president: "He left us as he came," he replied, "fired with enthusiasm." I know you will leave this meeting, as I will, fired with enthusiasm to bring about those conditions which will enable Cornell to be even better than it is.

I am proud to be associated with you.

EBN 1/22/71